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## CHATHAM, 1708-1908<sup>1</sup>

CHATHAM belongs not only to the English race, but to the English race as a whole—to the English race in the length and breadth of its dispersion throughout the world. Other statesmen have been more judicious, more temperate, more simple-minded. It is the glory of Chatham that he possessed an eye which swept the full horizon, a greatness of soul which raised him above insular prejudice and pride. Let us not deify the Anglo-Saxon breed. But such as it is, and in so far as it cherishes a certain community of sentiment, Chatham's deeds and aspirations are an indivisible part of its inheritance. The farther its activities extend the higher will mount his reputation, since the three things for which he strove were the freedom of the English, their greatness and their unity.

It is true that one can find little edification in the methods by which Pitt fought for promotion to the cabinet. Nor are his speeches free from rants that suggest the more turgid outbursts of Marlowe. By act and word he showed himself devoid of humor. He does not escape the sarcasm which Persius flings at those who love popular applause—*pulchrum est digito monstrari*. He could adopt an air of insufferable superiority. Histrionic by temperament it was difficult for him not to mingle passions that were simulated with those that were sincere.

But Chatham's failings are of a type which suggests regret rather than reprobation. Indeed modern pathology affords us a better key to his disposition than was possessed by earlier critics. It has been said that "There was never yet philosopher who could endure the toothache patiently", and every day we accept physical infirmity in explanation of an uncertain temper. But when organic disease stretches its victim upon the rack, the spectator can no longer stop short at an indulgent forbearance. His active sympathy is aroused, and the greater the talents which are impaired the deeper will be the pity. Now Sir Andrew Clark has said of Chatham: "Suppressed gout disordered the whole nervous system, and drove him into a state of mental depression, varying with excitement and equivalent to insanity. But there was no specific brain disease."

<sup>1</sup> A paper read before the American Historical Association at Richmond on December 30, 1908.

If Chatham's nerves were subject to constant irritation from the derangements of his body, he was no less unfortunate in another circumstance which affected his public actions. I refer to the fact that the English people did not then choose their own Prime Minister. Hence for Pitt a long and painful ascent to power. The Reverend Francis Thackeray could shut his eyes to any blemish. Less hardy admirers of Chatham cannot but admit that in his dealings with the Pelhams he fell far below his best. To be more explicit, he displayed an eagerness in his quest for office which was equal to that of his competitors. The king disliked him, for though a Whig he was a *frondeur*. There was a further obstacle in that he did not belong to the narrow circle of the Whig oligarchy. Thus at a time when the masses were unable to give him direct, decisive support, he ran his race under a great handicap. I think it cannot be shown that in his quest of power he compromised his principles on any fundamental issue. His worst sins were a willingness to enter mixed and warring coalitions, the employment of factious opposition to enhance his importance, and lack of dignity in asking others for their support. It is sad that only by adopting pushful methods could he break through the cordon of prejudice which opposed him. Essentially, however, he was an idealist. He cared nothing for money, and if he coveted power it was that he might win fame by exalting his country.

After all, the dissection of character into merits and imperfections is an anatomical process. What should interest biographers most is psychic physiology. Now there are those who seem to demand that every great man should be a duplicate of Tennyson's King Arthur. In family life Chatham satisfies even this test, proving himself the "selfless man and stainless gentleman". For the rest he came a little too late to take pattern in youth after Sir Charles Grandison. Perhaps this was not altogether a misfortune.

In any case one must refrain from drawing out the catalogue of qualities. Certain foibles and weaknesses have been mentioned, but not for the sake of ushering in that formal antithesis of vices and virtues which was once the fashion. If Chatham's limitations have been mentioned it is because they are conspicuously present; and furthermore because after the utmost allowance for them has been made, it is still clear that he possessed true loftiness and nobility of soul. To moral endowments above everything else he owed his standing and his power. I do not underrate the capacity which he displayed as an organizer of victory. But during the crisis of the Seven Years' War the inspiration he imparted was of more

service to England than any skill of strategy that he displayed. How much is summed up in the words "No one ever left Pitt's closet without feeling himself a braver man!"

Grounded in robustness of character was Chatham's eloquence, by which Fox was subdued and Murray cowed. Faults of taste his speeches might contain, but they possessed such impact as belong to no other utterances that have been delivered in the House of Commons. It was the rush of the philippic rather than the calm Olympic oratory which Pericles is said to have learned from Anaxagoras. But often in elevation of sentiment, of mood, Chatham's periods reached the up-in-the-clouds strain of the Athenian statesmen as Plutarch has described it—the *μετεωρολογία και μεταρσιωλεσχία* of genius. His judgments rested on the broadest considerations which the case presented rather than on special or temporary circumstance. He is defining his own openness of outlook when he says: "Oliver Cromwell, who astonished mankind by his intelligence, did not derive it from spies in every cabinet in Europe: he drew it from the Cabinet of his own sagacious mind."

When face to face with an idealist like Chatham we are bound to ask: Whence comes his idealism? From what streams does he quaff? On what spiritual food has his soul been nourished? In this case a partial answer is supplied by Chatham's letters to his nephew with their enthusiastic commendation of Latin literature. Fortunately one need not be a great scholar to derive inspiration from classical antiquity. Keats found in Lemprière's *Dictionary* enough Hellenism to furnish forth his "Ode on a Grecian Urn". Chatham, whose knowledge of Latin was most unscientific, managed somehow to imbibe a sense of hero-worship for the austere patriots of the Roman Republic. And to bring his idealism, his romanticism, into touch with England he added to Livy, Spenser. In the record of his life, I find few facts more significant than his sister's statement that the only thing he knew accurately was the *Faerie Queene*.

To the literary attainments just mentioned, and to his marvellous oratory, must be added Chatham's political creed. Dr. Johnson might call Whiggism the negation of all principle, but with Pitt it was not so. His conception of the state pointed to Aristotle's *πολιτεία*, wherein public affairs are conducted by all for the general benefit. For him liberty postulated the right of the whole people to participate in the decision of national issues. Hence he advocated Parliamentary reform. Hence he was fain to feel that his best title to the tenure of power was that popular approval which

he possessed more fully than any politician of his time. Yet his respect for the royal office was genuine and deep. It became a byword with his enemies that at an audience his great beaked nose could be seen between his legs.

Of course in all this there is no inconsistency. One may be willing to sacrifice his life for the liberty of the subject without thereby impairing his reverence for the crown. According to the Whiggism of Pitt the constitution meant the sovereignty of the English people, the supremacy of the national will. But the national will had sanctioned the Revolution settlement, and so long as the king did not unlawfully enlarge his prerogative he was entitled to that deference which Chatham offered in elaborate genuflection. As for the rights of the Upper Chamber, his position is defined in one terse, unequivocal sentence. "The privileges of the House of Peers, however transcendent, however appropriated to them stand, in fact, upon the broad bottom of the people."

Viewing all issues from the standpoint of the English people, Chatham maintained throughout his career an essential unity of purpose. And this is the link between his Whiggism and his imperialism. Richelieu has left it on record that his two aims were the supremacy of the king and the greatness of the kingdom. Chatham's one aim was the advancement of the English race, which in his mind embraced equally freedom at home and expansion beyond the seas. By universal acceptance England stands in history for popular government and colonies. Now Chatham touched both these great motives of the national development as no other statesman has done. More than any other one man he created the British Empire as it stands to-day, and he achieved this result by appealing to the racial instinct, by touching the national heart. Had he been less instinct with the spirit of devotion to the English people he could not have made himself its leader, and in a sense its prophet. Since Disraeli's day there has grown up an association of ideas between Jingo and Tory. But with Chatham Whiggism and imperialism were but two moods of the same emotion—the love of England as the motherland of the English folk.

It was an Archbishop of York who said that he would rather see England free than sober; and there are those to-day whose faith it is that they would rather see England small than insolent. Yet none but a very diminutive "little Englander" can view without pride the achievements of his race under Chatham's leadership in the Seven Years' War. No one, for instance, will suspect Mr. Frederic Harrison of entertaining wantonly belligerent sentiments.

If anywhere in the modern world there is an angel of peace it is he. And yet he noticeably omits to overwhelm Chatham with opprobrium for having won victories by the sword. Highly interesting is that long list of tributes which Mr. Harrison quotes in the introduction to his book on the Great Commoner—the tributes of opponents like Burke and Lord North, the tributes of Raynal and Brougham, of Macaulay and Green and Lecky. But most interesting of all are his own words as coming from one who abhors aggression. “It must not be forgotten”, says Mr. Harrison, “that Chatham’s wars were singularly sparing of blood, suffering and ruin, to the victors as to the conquered. They have resulted in permanent conquests and settlements unexampled in modern history.”

For myself I love to think of Chatham as one who inspired a languid and corrupt people with the heroism he had drawn from a larger age. Matthew Arnold says of Gray that he was a born poet who fell on a time of prose. Likewise Chatham grew among those who took their philosophy from Bolingbroke and their poetry from Pope. But he himself was by temper an Elizabethan, looking back to the *Faerie Queene* and the Armada and Philip Sidney. Nor can one better disclose the temper of his soul than by quoting those brave lines wherein Swinburne associates modern England with his *Astrophel*. They might indeed have been in the heart of Chatham as his thought turned to Sidney from Walpole and the Pelhams and Fox.

But England enmeshed and benetted  
By spiritless villanies round,  
By counsels of cowardice fretted,  
By trammels of treason enwound,  
Is still, though the season be other  
Than wept and rejoiced over thee,  
Thy England, thy lover, thy mother,  
Sublime as the sea.

And in this spirit he braved the House of Bourbon.

From the period of triumph it is a sad and swift descent to the days when the English people were threatened with disruption. But English history would lack one of its finest episodes had not this shattered old man been suffered to play a part in the events of that tragic time. Superficially considered Chatham’s second ministry may seem to have been a wierd fiasco. Indeed when viewed from the standpoint of practical politics it is hard to imagine a failure more complete. But let no one forget that during the last twelve years of his life Chatham’s body was in Malebolge. What could not be quenched was the fire of his soul, which flashed out

in moments of respite from bodily anguish. What could not be dimmed was the eye that ranged broadly over the whole field of English interests.

We cannot stop to consider how the issues of 1765 and the next decade were complicated by the king's reassertion of prerogative. In touching upon America at the present moment one can only emphasize the nature of Chatham's attitude toward the problem that was presented by the disaffection of the colonies. Just as no other minister had seen so clearly the importance of America; just as no other minister had done so much for America; so when the storm clouds began to gather no one else in England recognized so fully the extent of the danger or its significance. I do not overlook Burke. Who can forget those noble words, "My hold of the colonies is in the close affection which grows from common names, from kindred blood, from similar privileges and equal protection?" Burke on Conciliation is unsurpassed. But it was not till 1775 that his utterances on this subject reached their classic height. In the first days of the Stamp Act Burke had still his way to make in public life. The voice which first swept England in opposition to the taxing of the colonies was Chatham's.

No one need be reminded that when the Stamp Act was passed Pitt lay at Bath in the clutches of gout. To appear on the floor of the House was beyond his power. He wrote strongly enough against the bill, witness his letter to Shelburne, but more he could not do until 1766. Then his whole force, moral and physical, was thrown into a demand for the repeal of the hateful measure. At no time was he more fully master of Parliament than when disclosing his whole mind on the relation which should subsist between England and America. What were other matters compared to this? "I hope gentlemen will come to this debate", he said, "with all the temper and impartiality that his Majesty recommends, and the importance of the subject requires—a subject of greater importance than ever engaged the attention of this House, that subject only excepted, when, near a century ago, it was the question whether you yourselves would be bond or free." At a later date Burke told the House of Commons that it should auspicate all its proceedings on America with the old watchword of the Church, *Sursum Corda*. Chatham approached this great national crisis in the same mood. Nothing else that Englishmen could think of was comparable with the issue presented by the spectacle of unrest in the colonies.

Thinking thus Chatham envisaged the crisis in the largest way.

With the unity of the race at stake, what was this peppercorn of revenue that Grenville had proposed to bring into the Treasury by his stamp tax? But it would be highly unjust to suppose that because on broad grounds of public expediency Chatham felt it unwise to break with the colonies, he was unwilling to face the constitutional points at issue.

I am no courtier of America. I stand up for this kingdom. I maintain that the Parliament has a right to bind, to restrain America. Our legislative power over the colonies is sovereign and supreme. When it ceases to be sovereign and supreme I would advise every gentleman to sell his land if he can and embark for that country. When two countries are connected like England and her colonies, without being incorporated, the one must necessarily govern; the greater must rule the less; but so rule as not to contradict the fundamental principles that are common to both.

Basing his case on the essential difference between legislation and taxation, Chatham maintained that it was robbery for Great Britain to tax the colonies, taking from them money which was not at the disposition of Parliament. The point is this. In supporting his argument he did not set up as the standard a type of colonial theory which had never been accepted by Great Britain—a type of colonial theory so generous as to withhold from the mother country the right of binding her colonies by legislation. Conceivably Chatham might have declared that Great Britain was all wrong in her colonial outlook. But not being a philosopher, and taking things as they were, he said: "Very well, this legislative right is ours. We have always claimed it. But does that make the colonists the bastards of England? No, they are her sons. And you have no right by taxation to lay finger on a penny of theirs." Or, to quote his own words: "The gentleman asks, When were the colonies emancipated? I desire to know when they were made slaves."

Thus for Chatham, as for Burke, the criterion is freedom. It is the spirit of the English communion which forbids coercion, even if it could be exercised.

Of course we must recognize that even under the most favorable circumstances it might have proved impossible to preserve the political unity of the English race. And there may be a doubt as to whether human progress is wholly contingent upon Anglo-Saxon sovereignty. The narrowing of the world through modern means of communication opens up international and ethnological problems which, undreamt of by Chatham, are but dimly apprehended by



ourselves. Yet a great historical tradition is among the imperishable possessions of mankind. Like Greece and Rome, England has her traditions—England, I mean, in the broadest sense of language, that is to say, each spot where those of English lineage abide. How much the tie of sentiment still means no one can say. Circumstances have not yet applied a decisive test. But that it means something is a fact of common knowledge.

Remembering this we look back, two centuries from Chatham's birth, upon a career which was inseparably connected with the English—not with England as 'an island but with the English as a race. The year before Chatham died Burgoyne surrendered at Saratoga. Twenty years earlier there had begun under the Great Commoner that marvellous series of victories which made the English a power in every continent. And so in summing up, one would depict Chatham as the last in time of those leaders whose deeds and memory recall to Englishmen everywhere their common origin. No one ever wrought more for the race, or loved it more intensely, or served it more willingly, or viewed its political disruption with greater grief of soul.

CHARLES W. COLBY.